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THE FIRST MISSIONARY IN WISCONSIN

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When in 1634 Jean Nicolet, agent of Champlain, who was the founder of New France and the discoverer of the Great Lakes, reached the upper source of the St. Lawrence at the foot of Green Bay, his voyage marked the close of a great era of exploration. It was twenty years before other white men came to Wisconsin. In that interval conditions in the interior of North America had absolutely changed. Wisconsin's forests, formerly the quiet haunt of a few wandering Winnebago Indians, had by 1652 become a refuge for a horde of Indian fugitives—tribes of the Algonquian and Iroquoian families who were fleeing from their enemies, the Iroquois of central New York. These latter, having obtained firearms from the Dutch traders at Albany, turned these remorseless weapons upon the primitive tribes of the interior, whom they either exterminated or drove off in helpless, terror-stricken flight.

Of these refugees in Wisconsin two tribes were known to the French settlers in Canada. One of these was the Huron, which had formerly had its villages southeast of Lake Huron, in the present Ontario, Canada. The other was the Ottawa, which when first discovered lived on Manitoulin and other islands of Georgian Bay. The Iroquois in 1650 raided the villages of both of these tribes, and killed or carried captive most of their inhabitants. A few escaped to the woods and pushed westward along the shores of the Great Lakes. These frightened fugitives stopped for a time on the islands at the mouth of Green Bay; then hearing that the Iroquois were pursuing them thither, they fled to the mainland. There a raiding expedition of Iroquois overtook them; but the Huron and Ottawa for the once defended themselves behind a palisade of trees, and the Iroquois, lacking food, were soon forced to abandon the

siege. After the departure of their enemy the Huron and Ottawa refugees, saved for the once, were in terror at the probable return of the Iroquois. They thereupon fled from the shore of Green Bay farther into the Wisconsin forests, until after many vicissitudes the Huron built a village on the headstreams of Black River, and the Ottawa on Lac Court Oreilles. Here they dwelt in comparative security for several years, the Iroquois having turned their conquering arms against other tribes. The Ottawa, somewhat recovering from their fear, finally ventured on a trading expedition to Montreal for French goods. From their village on Lac Court Oreilles, this trading party went by waterways to Chequamegon Bay; thence to Sault Ste. Marie, along the northern shore of Georgian Bay; up the French River to Lake Nipissing, whence a portage was made to Ottawa River; thence their bark canoes glided down that stream to their destination. The Ottawa River was so named, not because the Ottawa Indians lived thereon, but because it was the trade route to their country. Indeed, so well known did the Ottawa become as trading Indians, that after 1660 all the region of the upper lakes was known as the "Ottawa Country."

In their earlier home in western Ontario both the Ottawa and the Huron had been visited by Jesuit missionaries who had attempted to induce these Indians to abandon their native spirit worship and be baptized into the Christian faith. A few among each tribe heeded the teachings of the "Black Robes," as the missionaries were called from the long black cassocks they customarily wore. When the Ottawa, in 1654 and the succeeding years, came to the St. Lawrence to trade they were asked to take some Black Robes back with them to their country to continue the mission. At first they refused, saying that the way was long and hard, that every occupant of a canoe must do his share of paddling and portaging, for which the white

missionaries were not fitted. Finally, after much importuning by the Jesuit superior they consented. In 1656 two missionaries embarked in the returning trade flotilla of the Indians from northern Wisconsin. On their upward voyage, however, they fell into an ambuscade of the Iroquois; one of the missionaries was killed, the other was abandoned by the Indians as they sought safety in flight up the Ottawa River.

It was four years before another trading fleet could be induced to carry any missionaries to the western regions. Finally, in 1660 the Ottawa, when preparing for their return journey after finishing their trade, consented that a Black Robe should accompany them. The choice of the Jesuit superior for this difficult mission fell upon Father René Ménard. Father Ménard was then a man of fifty-five years of age, of a delicate constitution, worn by long years of service in the western wilderness. Twenty years before, he had come to Canada, where he had taught in the Huron mission before it was destroyed by the Iroquois. He could speak both the Ottawa and the Huron languages; indeed he was credited with the ability to use six Indian dialects. When the opportunity came for him to adventure with the Ottawa to their northern home he eagerly accepted it, although he realized that it was in effect a death sentence. The night before he left Canada he wrote to a friend: "In three or four months you may include me in the *Memento* for the dead, in view of the kind of life led by these peoples, of my age, and of my delicate constitution. In spite of that, I have felt such powerful promptings and have seen in this affair so little of the purely natural, that I could not doubt if I failed to respond to this opportunity that I should experience an endless remorse." On his way up the St. Lawrence to Montreal he met the bishop of Canada, who said to him, "My Father, every reason seems to retain you here; but God, more powerful than aught else, requires

you yonder." Over and over again in the midst of his hardships, sufferings, and desolation in the far interior of North America these words, "God requires you yonder," supported his soul.

The Indian traders who had promised the French of Canada to care for Father Ménard quickly broke their word. On the journey along the Ottawa River they loaded him with heavy packages at the portages and laughed at him when he sank beneath their burden. They forced him to paddle constantly, and to disembark in the roughest places. In scrambling over rocks he cut his feet; when he afterwards was compelled to leap into the water to lighten the load, one of his wounded feet became swollen and intensely painful. Food was scarce; and the Father was allotted the worst and the smallest share. He was separated from the French traders who might have aided him, and from his own companion or *donné* who had volunteered to accompany him. All these afflictions the patient missionary bore as the will of God for his chastening. At last Lake Superior was reached, when a worse accident befell the poor traveler. As they were resting on the beach, the canoe in which he and three Indians were traveling was broken by a falling tree. Many of the other canoes of the trading flotilla had passed on. None of the belated canoes would stop for the stranded unfortunates. For six days they existed by pounding bones and eating offal to sustain life. At last some passers-by took pity on them and carried them on to where a party of the Ottawa were planning to winter at the foot of Keweenaw Bay. They arrived there the fifteenth of October, whereupon Ménard named the bay for Ste. Thérèse, whose fête day it was.

Ménard had been instructed to establish his mission at the Ottawa village on Lac Court Oreilles, but during the summer of 1660, while the trading party was absent, the Ottawa had begun to abandon that location for a more

convenient one on Chequamegon Bay. Ménard, who had been detained by the accident to his canoe, was unable to reach the principal village at this latter place, and was compelled to pass the winter with the small group who remained at Keweenaw Bay. The chief of this village was named le Brochet (in English, The Pike). He was a surly brute, "proud and extremely vicious, possessing four or five wives." When Ménard, following the promptings of his conscience, reproved the chief for his polygamy, that dignitary turned the missionary out of his wigwam in the midst of a Lake Superior winter, with no other shelter than a poor hut he made for himself of the branches of a fir tree. Fortunately for Father Ménard, the winter was unusually mild; the bay did not freeze over until the middle of February; and the wine for the mass did not congeal in the Father's hut from November to the following March.¹

In the latter month the French traders who had wintered at Chequamegon came to Keweenaw to seek Father Ménard. They carried him back with them in their canoes, going across Keweenaw Point by way of Portage River and Lake, spending five days in skirting the Lake Superior shore. At Chequamegon Ménard found a great concourse of Indians, refugees of several tribes from the interior of Wisconsin.² Among these tribesmen Ménard worked with ardor. On Ascension Day (May 23 in 1661) a Huron came from the Black River village reporting that his people were dying with hunger. This news roused Father Ménard's compassion; he determined that it was his duty to go thither and baptize all the heathen he could before their death,

¹ The description of the sufferings and hardships of Father Ménard during the winter of 1660-61 is taken from his letters written to the Superior in Canada. A brief synopsis of these letters is in *Wis. Hist. Colls.*, XVI, 21-22; the originals may be found in R. G. Thwaites, *Jesuit Relations* (Cleveland, 1896-1903), XLVI, 127-45.

² This article takes issue with previous studies of the career of Ménard at this point. Earlier students appear not to have remarked the change of residence in the spring of 1661. Ménard's own letter, it seems to the present writer, plainly describes the journey from Ste. Thérèse Bay to Chequamegon Bay. If he started on his last journey from the latter place, the route must inevitably have been the one herein described.

thus assuring their entrance to Paradise. Three French traders were about going inland with the Huron messenger; by them the missionary sent a present and a message to the Huron chief requesting permission to visit his village. The traders had a difficult journey; they took the usual canoe route from Chequamegon Bay to Lac Court Oreilles—up White River to Long Lake, portaging from there to the Namekagon, down that stream to a point opposite Bass Lake, thence to Grindstone Lake and Lac Court Oreilles.³ From there to reach the Huron village they must have gone down the outlet to the Chippewa River, down the latter to some stream coming from the east, probably the Jump or Yellow River, both of which head near the sources of the Black. On arrival at the village the traders found the Huron in a famishing condition, so weak they could scarcely stand or lift their hands. Their corn harvest was some months off. The white men offered what relief they could, but thought it useless to deliver Ménard's message, since how could an old man, feeble and broken in health, undertake a journey through the wilderness. They themselves, over two weeks on their return route, arrived at Chequamegon Bay after Ménard had sent to his superior what proved to be the last letter he ever wrote.⁴

Ménard was determined to visit his Huron neophytes. In vain did the Frenchmen attempt to dissuade him from his purpose. "God calls me thither and I must go, although it should cost me my life," he reiterated. Finally, on July 13, he started, carrying for provisions some smoked meat and a bag of dried sturgeon. One of the traders volunteered to accompany him. Some Huron who had come

³ Information on the canoe route from Chequamegon Bay to Lac Court Oreilles was received in 1919 from Frank Setter of Hayward, Wisconsin.

⁴ The letter in *Jesuit Relations*, XLVI, 145, is dated "This 2nd of June, 1661. From nostre Dame de bon Secours, called Chassahamigon." The Huron messenger arrived May 23 and the traders went inland with him the last of the month; Ménard says he had been awaiting their return for fifteen days—thus the letter must have been completed after June second; probably for June should be read July 2, 1661.

to trade offered to serve as guides. The little party took the land trail to Lac Court Oreilles; probably this ran up the west bank of Bad River to where Mellen now stands; then south by east to the site of Glidden; along the Chippewa to a point east of the present Reserve; thence to the lake.⁵ The Huron guides, weak for lack of food and dissatisfied with the slow progress of the old man through the heavy forests, soon deserted him, promising to send some young Huron to Lac Court Oreilles to guide the missionary to their village. Either they never intended to do this or no one in the village would volunteer. Certain it is that no guides came; the Black Robe and his companion, after waiting two weeks, found their small store of provisions dwindling rapidly. They had the fortune to find an Indian canoe hid in the bushes by the lakeside. Into this they stepped and entrusted their lives to the rushing waters of the lake outlet. As they entered the Chippewa the river grew swifter and swifter. Ménard's companion had some skill in paddling, and guided the tiny craft in safety to the mouth of the stream by which the ascent was to be made to the Huron village. This river the trader recognized from his voyage of a month before; up this eastern tributary of the Chippewa he turned the prow of his little craft.⁶ Which of the streams that lead toward the headwaters of the Black it may have been, we cannot at this late day determine. In all probability it was the present Jump River; but it may have been the Yellow River of Taylor County.⁷ Both streams are full of rapids in one of which

⁵ For information on the land route now in use between Chequamegon Bay and Lac Court Oreilles the writer is indebted to Henry La Rush, Reserve, Wisconsin. See *Wis. Mag. of Hist.*, III, 150.

⁶ Perrot, who heard the story of Ménard's death within five years after it occurred, says he was ascending a river when lost. See E. H. Blair, *Indian Tribes of the Upper Mississippi and Region of the Great Lakes* (Cleveland, 1911), I, 173.

⁷ In a manuscript map of the Great Lakes now in Harvard University, formerly belonging to Francis Parkman (known as Parkman No. 3), a cross shows the site of Father Ménard's death, directly south of a small lake, seemingly intended for Lac Court Oreilles. A reproduction of this map is in Justin Winsor, *Narrative and Critical History of America* (Boston, 1884), IV, 215.

the canoe was caught and nearly driven down stream. Ménard, to lighten his companion's labors, considerably stepped ashore, while the trader bent all his strength to breast the rough water of the rapid. Safely up in quiet water he waited for the missionary, who was not in sight. After waiting some time the Frenchman became alarmed and fired his fusee to guide the Black Robe to the canoe. After five shots, and much hallooing, the trader in his turn became frightened at the menace of the forest, where every step involved him in a tangle of trees and bushes. Help must be had to find the lost missionary; the Huron village was close at hand; thither the trader hastened, only in his turn to become lost in the intricacies of the forest, so that it was the second day before he finally arrived among the Huron. There the wayfarer could communicate with the Indians only by signs; in that manner he managed to convey to them the loss of the missionary in the forest, bribing them by promises of a reward to go in search of him. One Huron finally agreed to go to the Black Robe's rescue; but after a brief absence he rushed back to the village with a false alarm of the approach of a hostile band. "At this cry the pity felt for the Father vanished, as well as the inclination to go to search for him." In vain his companion besought the savages and bribed them to undertake the rescue; the Huron were obdurate in their refusal to search for the missing missionary.

Days passed and no news of the Black Robe came from the silent forest. The French trader went back to Chequamegon and reported the loss. A son of le Brochet carried the news to Quebec. Once a report was current that some of Ménard's effects had been found in a cabin of western Indians; this rumor was never substantiated; when taxed with his murder, the savages denied it; had they been guilty they would probably have boasted of the deed. The more probable supposition is that Ménard died in the forest

where he was lost—those dense pineries where the light of the sun could scarcely penetrate. Seeking for the head of the rapid, he became confused through a wrong turn, and had probably gone out of hearing before his comrade fired his fusee. His strength was slight, and he had with him as food only a small piece of dried meat. It is to be hoped that his end was peaceful, and that he died consoled by the vision of the crown of martyrdom which he had sought when coming West.

Father Ménard's associates in New France bewailed his loss and extolled his virtues. One of the fruits of his mission was his whilom host, le Brochet, who after imprisonment at Montreal for his cruelty to the Black Robe, became a firm friend of the French.

Thus perished in the heart of our northern forest the first missionary to the Indians of Wisconsin. The exact site of his martyrdom will probably never be known. Whatever we of these days may think of his prudence or of his theology, we can but admire his heroism and his devotion to duty. He was the forerunner of a noble band that counted not their lives dear unto themselves, if by any means they might save some. Father Ménard's fame belongs to our permanent history, and to all those who admire unswerving devotion to duty even unto death.